

Exploring Reflective Journal as a Pathway to Teacher Autonomy: A Qualitative Case Study of EFL Secondary Teachers in Indonesia

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Abstract

Reflective practice and teacher autonomy are conceptually linked but often examined separately. While previous studies have explored reflective practice to enhance individual self-awareness, critical thinking, and teaching competence, little is known about its broader implications for fostering teacher autonomy in institutional and policy contexts. This qualitative case study investigated how reflective teaching journals contribute to the development of professional autonomy among EFL secondary teachers. Specifically, it examined (1) the elements of reflection evident in teachers' journal entries and (2) how teachers exercise self-initiated pedagogical decision-making in lesson preparation. Five EFL secondary teachers from a senior high school in Serang, Indonesia, were purposively selected. Data comprised 20 reflective journal entries, guided by structured reflection prompts, and semi-structured interviews. Five reflection elements, suggestions, problems, hypotheses, reasoning, and testing were identified using content analysis and thematic coding. Testing and reasoning were most frequently linked to problem-solving strategies for increasing student engagement. Autonomy was evident in teachers' adaptations of syllabi, sequencing of topics, and supplementation or replacement of textbook materials to meet learners' needs. The findings indicate that reflective elements do not necessarily occur in a fixed sequence and highlight how reflective journaling can serve as both a diagnostic and developmental tool for teacher autonomy. The study recommends greater institutional support for diverse reflective practices to strengthen teachers' capacity for informed, context-responsive decision-making in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Reflective practice, teacher autonomy, reflective journals, EFL secondary teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), teacher professional development has long been recognized as a crucial driver of instructional quality and student learning outcomes (Rachmajanti et al., 2020; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Giurastante, 2024; Truong & Murray, 2019; Banegas et al., 2013). Continuous development enables teachers to adapt to evolving curricular demands (Ali et al., 2023; Nalbantoğlu & Bümen, 2023), integrate

innovative pedagogical approaches, and respond effectively to diverse learner needs (Ramírez-Montoya et al., 2021; Zimmer & Matthews, 2021; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2020). In Indonesia, where English is positioned as a compulsory subject in secondary education yet remains a foreign language for most learners, the demands on teachers are particularly complex (Widodo, 2016; Zein et al., 2020). As emphasized by Puspitasari (2024), Indonesian teachers must not only master linguistic content and teaching methodologies but also navigate challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and varying student proficiency levels. Reflective practice has emerged within this landscape as a widely acknowledged mechanism for fostering professional growth. Through systematic reflection, teachers are encouraged to critically examine their instructional decisions, assess their impact on student learning, and identify areas for improvement (Lefebvre et al., 2023; Zhai et al., 2023; Gudeta, 2022). As noted by Kim et al. (2019) and Nurkamto and Sarosa (2020), such processes promote deeper self-awareness, sharpen critical thinking, and strengthen pedagogical competence, enabling teachers to move beyond routine teaching toward more intentional, evidence-informed practice.

Furthermore, while conceptually distinct, reflective practice and teacher autonomy share an intrinsic relationship in shaping effective and responsive teaching. As Sellars (2012) and Stăncescu et al. (2019) emphasized, reflective practice refers to the deliberate process through which teachers critically examine their own pedagogical actions, assess the outcomes of these actions, and adapt their approaches to improve learning experiences. Dewey's (1933) reflective thinking theory positions this process as a purposeful, cyclical form of inquiry that moves through identifiable elements, such as suggestions, problem identification, hypothesis formation, reasoning, and testing, each of which contributes to deeper professional understanding and more effective instructional responses. Through this lens, reflection fosters a mindset of inquiry, enabling teachers to identify strengths and areas for growth in their instructional practices (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012; Houde, 2022; Asaoka, 2021). Teacher autonomy, on the other hand, encompasses the capacity and professional freedom to make informed decisions regarding curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. It involves exercising judgment to adapt lessons, modify materials, and implement pedagogical innovations in response to learners' needs and contextual realities (Da Silva, 2021; Dieudé & Prøitz, 2022; Cirocki & Anam, 2021; Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025). The link between the two lies in the fact that meaningful autonomy is not merely a matter of institutional permission; it is underpinned by a teacher's ability to make decisions that are informed, purposeful, and contextually appropriate (Brandisauskiene et al., 2022; Barman et al., 2016), a process that reflective thinking actively supports.

Reflective practice has been widely recognized as vital to EFL teachers' professional growth, contributing to teaching quality, professional autonomy, and continuous development. Empirical evidence shows that reflective engagement is positively associated with teaching effectiveness (Motallebzadeh et al., 2018) and closely linked to job satisfaction and teacher autonomy, while being negatively influenced by contextual challenges such as time pressure, student demotivation, and discipline problems (Aliakbari et al., 2019). Studies also indicate that teachers who engage in reflection tend to demonstrate stronger attitudes toward professional self-development (Gheith & Aljaberi, 2018) and view it as a practical tool for problem-solving, knowledge sharing, and professional growth (Derinalp, 2022). Comparative research reveals that while Indonesian EFL teachers often focus their reflective

questions on student learning and their Philippine counterparts emphasize self-reflection, both groups acknowledge its importance for innovation and ongoing improvement (Hikmat et al., 2022). At the pre-service level, strategies such as recollection, reflection-in-action, and mentoring have enhanced decision-making, problem-solving, and the development of personal teaching theories, ultimately fostering early professional autonomy (Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021). Collectively, these studies highlight that reflective practice operates not only as an individual developmental process but also as a contextually shaped activity, with institutional conditions, cultural orientations, and professional stages influencing how it is enacted. This body of literature informs the present study's focus on exploring reflective journals as a pathway to teacher autonomy in the Indonesian secondary EFL context.

Although reflective practice is widely acknowledged as a means of enhancing teachers' self-awareness, critical thinking, and pedagogical competence, it is often framed primarily as an individual developmental tool, with limited exploration of its broader role in fostering teacher autonomy within institutional and policy contexts. In EFL settings such as Indonesia, where curricular mandates, administrative demands, and contextual constraints can limit teachers' professional agency, little is known about how structured reflective tools like reflective teaching journals can support autonomous decision-making, curriculum adaptation, and instructional innovation. This study addresses that gap by integrating Dewey's reflective thinking framework with the concept of teacher autonomy, offering a novel perspective that examines the presence of reflective elements in teachers' practice and how these elements translate into self-initiated pedagogical decisions. Focusing on the lived realities of Indonesian secondary EFL teachers, it aims to investigate how professional autonomy is managed through reflective journal writing, to identify the elements of reflection evident in journal entries, and to explore how these reflective processes inform teachers' lesson preparation and pedagogical choices.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how EFL secondary teachers engage in reflective practice through reflective journals to promote teacher autonomy. The case study design was chosen for its suitability in addressing non-hypothetical questions and investigating naturally occurring phenomena within authentic contexts, allowing for an in-depth understanding of multiple constructions of meaning and knowledge in a school setting (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2014). As a bounded inquiry system, a case study enables the researcher to focus intensively on a small number of participants to generate rich, contextually grounded insights rather than broad generalizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consistent with this scope, the study was conducted on a limited scale and involved five EFL secondary teachers from one senior high school in Serang, Indonesia. Therefore, the findings are intended to provide in-depth, context-specific insights rather than serve as generalizable claims about all teachers in Indonesia.

Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, a strategy designed to select individuals with specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). The selected teachers had participated in various professional development initiatives, including the Emancipated Curriculum program, the Guru Belajar community, and the Guru Penggerak community in Banten Province, which introduced them to teacher autonomy and practices supporting greater

professional agency. Such background experiences positioned them as information-rich cases capable of offering nuanced perspectives on the interplay between reflective practice and autonomy. For confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms (IST 1; IST 2, IST 3; IST 4; IST 5). IST 1, IST 2, and IST 3 each had more than ten years of teaching experience, while IST 4 and IST 5 had been teaching for nine years. This diversity in teaching tenure allowed for exploring how reflective practice and autonomy manifest across varying stages of professional experience.

Two complementary data collection methods were employed to capture teachers' reflections and manifestations of professional autonomy. The primary method was reflective journal writing, which provided insights into how participants reflected systematically on their teaching practices. Each teacher was given a reflection guideline adapted from [Richards and Lockhart \(1994\)](#), specifically designed for language classrooms to prompt critical engagement with their pedagogical decisions. Reflective journals were selected because they allow teachers to articulate their thoughts, decisions, and instructional reasoning without the constraints of formal observation settings, facilitating a more authentic account of their professional thinking ([Moon, 2006](#); [Farrell, 2013](#)). Furthermore, journal writing supports the natural flow of thought while accommodating individual linguistic expression, aligning with [Borg's \(2006\)](#) observation that such writing entails substantial linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural effort. Throughout the data collection period, a total of 20 reflective journal entries were gathered, serving as the primary dataset for this study. The second method consisted of semi-structured interviews, which enabled a deeper exploration of teachers' perspectives on autonomy, decision-making, and instructional challenges. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their balance between consistency in core questions and flexibility to probe participants' unique experiences, thereby enhancing the richness and contextual specificity of the data ([Cohen et al., 2018](#); [Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015](#)).

The data from reflective journals were analyzed using content analysis, a systematic approach for identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data ([Malik & Hamied, 2014](#); [Schreier, 2012](#)). The coding process followed the framework proposed by [Auerbach and Silverstein \(2003\)](#), integrating [Malik and Hamied's \(2014\)](#) guidelines for category and theme development to ensure methodological rigor. The analysis proceeded through five iterative steps: (1) extracting relevant text segments and organizing them systematically in a matrix; (2) analyzing syntactical structures and language patterns to identify the presence of reflective elements; (3) categorizing, labeling, and applying color-coding to each unit of analysis based on its classification; (4) conducting within-case analysis to detect patterns unique to individual participants; and (5) performing cross-case analysis to compare and contrast patterns across all participants. Interview data were manually coded to generate thematic insights into teacher autonomy and the contextual factors influencing it, ensuring triangulation of findings and enhancing the study's credibility ([Miles et al., 2020](#)).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The EFL secondary teachers in Serang demonstrated the reflective elements outlined by [Dewey \(1933\)](#) and further elaborated by [Loughran \(1996\)](#). However, they did not consistently apply all elements of reflection in every situation. As [Loughran \(1996\)](#) notes, variations in the use and frequency of these reflective phases over time may reflect the natural progression of an individual's reflective practice. Figure 1 presents the overall

frequency of each reflective element identified in the 20 journal entries submitted by the participants. Each teacher contributed four entries, with an average length ranging from 200 to 350 words per entry.

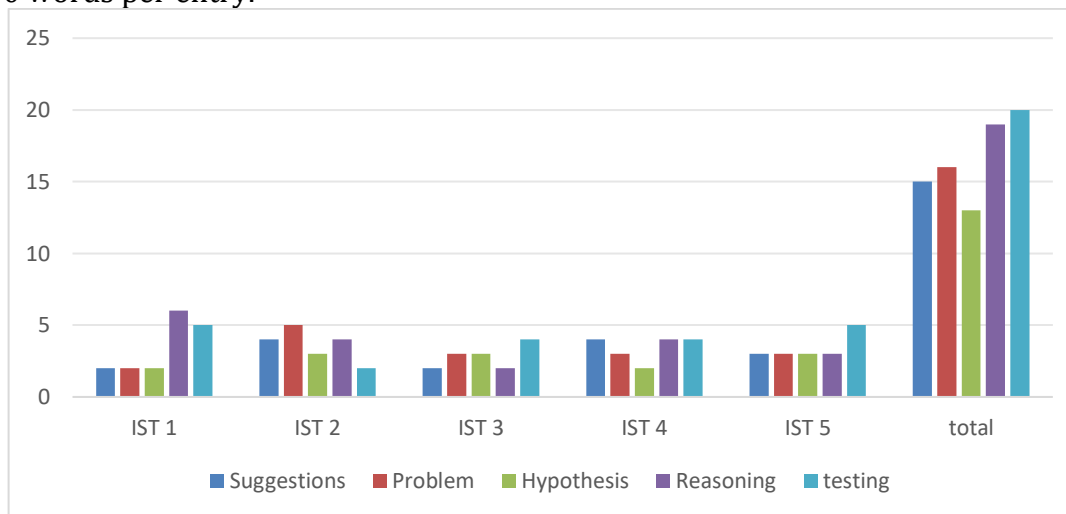


Figure 1. The trend of elements of reflection in reflective journal entries

Analysis of the reflective journal entries revealed that *testing* was the most frequently occurring element, recorded 20 times across the data set, followed closely by *reasoning*, which appeared 19 times. *Problems* and *suggestions* ranked next, with 16 and 15 occurrences, respectively, while the least frequent element was *hypothesis*, which appeared only 13 times in participants' reflections. The prominence of testing and reasoning suggests that the teachers tended to focus on verifying their pedagogical decisions and justifying their instructional strategies, processes that reflect higher-order reflective engagement and reliable epistemic practices grounded in analysis and the evaluation of competing ideas (Brownlee et al., 2022; Abdar & Shafaei, 2022; Wijnands et al., 2022; Chan & Lee, 2020). The relative scarcity of hypotheses may indicate that participants were less inclined to formulate tentative assumptions before acting, instead moving directly from problem recognition or suggestion to implementation and evaluation—an approach that may be shaped by the pragmatic demands of their teaching context (Sipman et al., 2021; Fathi et al., 2024). The substantial presence of problems and suggestions further highlights the teachers' awareness of instructional challenges and willingness to explore alternative solutions, aligning with Dewey's (1933) conception of reflection as a problem-solving process.

Suggestions

Suggestions emerge during the teaching and learning process when a situation prompts teachers to pause, reflect, and consider two or more possible courses of action, evaluate appropriate responses, or restructure classroom activities (Dewey, 1933; Loughran, 1996). In the reflective journals, suggestions appeared as the second most frequently occurring element, most often arising when teachers encountered challenges in their classroom practice. For example, in one journal entry, IST 3 described how she addressed student passivity during a lesson on application letters:

In today's class, I felt that students were more passive than usual. This was indicated when I explained the material; they tended to be silent and responded

with short answers. Possibly, because this material was new, maybe they needed more time to understand the material. Seeing students' reactions like this, I decided to re-explain the material slowly and occasionally asked them if they had understood what I had explained or which parts they still did not understand." (S#1_RJ-IST3_Entry#1).

Similarly, IST 5 described responding to students' difficulty in using specific vocabulary during a descriptive writing task:

"Students were asked to prepare their own drafts and write a descriptive text about their favorite athlete... One interesting moment occurred when a student used overly general vocabulary to describe a hair type, like 'short hair' or 'long hair,' but lacked specificity. I realized that they might not be familiar with more specific terms, so I took the opportunity to write down a few alternative vocabulary options on the board, like 'straight,' 'wavy,' 'curly,' and 'blonde,' for them to consider, so the result of their text would be more accurate." (S#3_RJ-IST5_Entry#4).

In both cases, the teachers demonstrated how reflective thinking can drive immediate, context-sensitive pedagogical adjustments to address emergent learner needs. IST 3 responded to unexpected student passivity by slowing the pace of instruction, re-explaining material more deliberately, and incorporating frequent comprehension checks—actions that align with recent perspectives on responsive teaching, which emphasize in-the-moment reflection to adapt instruction effectively (Hartmann et al., 2023; Kantawala, 2023). Such adjustments, as Gudeta (2022) notes, enable teachers to promptly implement and monitor potential solutions while maintaining sensitivity to learners' cognitive processing time, an important factor for sustaining engagement with new content (Sulis, 2024; Silvola et al., 2021). Similarly, IST 5 identified a gap in students' lexical knowledge during a descriptive writing task and responded by providing targeted vocabulary options to enhance accuracy. This intervention illustrates adaptive instructional scaffolding (Vaughn, 2014; Umutlu & Kim, 2020), which expands students' linguistic repertoire while simultaneously addressing immediate learning needs.

Problem

A problem in teaching and learning can be understood as an interruption that disrupts the flow of a lesson, prompting the teacher to pause and reflect before continuing. Such moments are often challenging, requiring teachers to work through confusion or doubt and to transform the situation into a meaningful learning experience for students. Loughran (1996) further notes that, unlike the issues addressed through suggestions, this element of reflection tends to occur less frequently because it involves navigating the greater complexity of problematic situations rather than addressing relatively straightforward concerns. In the reflective journal entries, problems most commonly related to student misbehavior, low engagement, and challenges with teaching methods. The following excerpt from IST 3 illustrates a problem involving student misbehavior:

"Today's session was focused on developing students' writing skills. I asked them to write their own application letters individually, choosing any job vacancy they were interested in. I gave them plenty of time to work on it, and I walked around

the classroom to make sure they were following the example and writing appropriately. While the students were working, something caught my attention. A few of them were getting too relaxed, some even had their feet up on the desks. Maybe because I rarely raise my voice, they feel it's okay to act that way. I ended up reminding them to behave more respectfully in class. I'm not usually the type of teacher who likes to scold, but seeing that kind of behavior didn't sit right with me." (P#2_RJ-IST3_Entry#2).

This example illustrates how reflective practice supports teachers in managing complex behavioral challenges that have the potential to disrupt lesson continuity. Unlike the relatively straightforward pedagogical adjustments often prompted by suggestions, problems of this nature require navigating interpersonal dynamics while simultaneously reinforcing classroom norms and maintaining a supportive learning climate. IST 3's choice to address the behavior calmly, rather than resorting to punitive measures, aligns with research emphasizing the importance of constructive discipline in fostering mutual respect and sustaining student engagement (Aliakbari et al., 2019; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018). Her direct yet non-escalatory intervention reflects what Oliver et al. (2011) term *preventive classroom management*, which corrects inappropriate behavior while preserving positive teacher-student relationships. Through this measured response, IST 3 mitigated the immediate disruption and reinforced the social and academic expectations underpinning a respectful and productive learning environment (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015; Rusticus et al., 2022).

Hypothesis

According to Dewey (1933), a hypothesis involves using one suggestion after another as a guiding idea to initiate and direct observation or other operations in collecting factual material. In this sense, a suggestion evolves into a more definite assumption that can be tested and potentially measured. As such, this reflection element often appeared alongside *testing* in the participants' reflective processes. Analysis of the reflective journals revealed that most of the hypotheses formulated by the teachers were subsequently followed by testing to verify their assumptions. One example can be seen in a journal entry written by IST 2:

"There are times when I question whether group discussions are really effective for students. Can they actually build their answers based on shared understanding? Are they truly engaging in meaningful conversations with their peers? Even though I still have those doubts from time to time, seeing them complete their work on time and do the task well has made me more confident in using this method regularly in my classroom." (H#4_RJ-IST2_Entry#4).

A similar process occurred in IST 4's reflection, where the hypothesis emerged directly from a problem:

"Next, I moved on to the main topic: narrative texts, with a focus on understanding and identifying direct and indirect speech. I wrote two example sentences on the board and asked the students to identify what kind of sentences they were. At first, no one responded. The class was completely silent. I was quite sure that some of them actually knew the answer, but maybe they were just too

shy to speak. To encourage participation, I offered some candy as a small reward and told them that whoever could answer would receive it. It seemed that offering a reward is necessary to encourage student participation in class.” (H#1_RJ-IST4_Entry#2).

These examples illustrate how the hypothesis phase in reflective practice often emerges from teachers’ critical questioning of their instructional approaches and classroom dynamics. In IST 2’s case, her initial skepticism about the value of group discussions reflects what [Rodgers \(2020\)](#) describes as *reflective doubt*, a cognitive state that prompts educators to examine the underlying assumptions of their practice. By observing students’ timely completion of tasks and the quality of their work, she could transform this uncertainty into a validated instructional choice, thereby reinforcing her professional confidence. Similarly, IST 4’s hypothesis arose directly from a classroom problem: students’ reluctance to respond. Her interpretation that the issue stemmed from low confidence rather than a lack of knowledge aligns with [Farrell and Guz’s \(2019\)](#) notion of teacher beliefs as powerful determinants of classroom decision-making. The subsequent introduction of a reward system to test this assumption exemplifies what [Farrell \(2013\)](#) and [Lefebvre et al. \(2023\)](#) term *action-oriented reflection*, in which teachers move seamlessly from hypothesis formation to practical experimentation. Across both cases, the hypothesis was not an isolated phase but closely intertwined with testing, underscoring reflective practice’s iterative and problem-solving nature ([Popp, 2021](#)).

Reasoning

Reasoning involves drawing insights and making logical connections that enable an individual to act in a deliberate and informed manner. [Dewey \(1933\)](#) explained that reasoning is formulated when information, ideas, and prior experiences are linked, allowing suggestions, hypotheses, and tests to be expanded in ways that deepen understanding of the subject matter. In the reflective journal entries, reasoning appeared in several forms, most commonly as a justification for testing that had been implemented or was planned for future lessons. For example, IST 4 reflected on her rationale for using a specific activity to encourage student participation:

“To make the reading activity more engaging, I created a ‘fireball’ out of paper and tossed it randomly to students. Whoever caught it had to read a paragraph from the text aloud. Normally, when I asked for volunteers to read, most students avoided eye contact or tried to pass the task on to a classmate. But using the fireball made the selection process feel fairer, and students participated more willingly.” (R#1_RJ-IST4_Entry#1).

Similarly, IST 5 demonstrated reasoning when justifying his choice to incorporate a literacy activity at the beginning of a lesson:

“The lesson began with a literacy activity, where I shared a link to an article titled ‘Bullying’ and asked the students to read and understand the content. This literacy activity is frequently conducted in class to help build students’ reading habits. From this activity, I was able to measure students’ comprehension by asking several questions related to the text.” (R#1_RJ-IST5_Entry#1).

These examples highlight how the reasoning phase of reflective practice operates as a crucial link between teachers' observations and their subsequent pedagogical actions. In IST 4's case, recognizing that low participation could diminish the quality of classroom interaction prompted her to devise a randomized selection strategy, the "fireball" activity, which introduced an element of novelty and fairness into the reading task. This aligns with research showing that interactive and game-like techniques can reduce learner reluctance and promote equitable participation (Chan & Lo, 2024; Gutierrez et al., 2023; Smiderle et al., 2020). Similarly, IST 5's reflection on his students' weak reading habits led him to embed a literacy activity at the start of lessons to cultivate consistent reading practice and monitor comprehension in real time. This approach reflects Nation's (2013) assertion that sustained and meaningful exposure to reading materials is essential for developing literacy competence in EFL contexts. Across both cases, reasoning provided a logical framework for teachers to connect observed needs with targeted interventions, embodying what Harrell (2018) and Machost and Stains (2023) term *deliberative reflection*—the process of articulating the rationale behind teaching choices to ensure they are pedagogically sound and contextually appropriate.

Testing

Testing is the phase in which a hypothesis is verified either overtly or covertly (Dewey, 1933). As Loughran (1996) explains, testing can lead to the discovery of a new issue or help clarify and refine an existing problem. In this case, IST 4 hypothesized that her students required more practice to strengthen their understanding of converting direct to indirect speech. She reflected:

"One clear difficulty faced by the students in this lesson was remembering the changes in tenses from direct to indirect speech and vice versa. For example, when direct speech uses the present tense, it should be changed to the past tense in indirect speech. In my opinion, one way to help students understand this concept is by giving them plenty of practice through varied sentence examples. Through today's UNO Block game, the students gradually demonstrated that they understood and were able to construct direct and indirect speech sentences. To ensure deeper comprehension, I plan to conduct individual evaluations in the next session." (T#3_RJ-IST4_Entry#3).

In the subsequent lesson, this planned test was implemented overtly. IST 4 evaluated students' comprehension through a quiz and observed encouraging results:

"Based on the quiz results, the majority of students were able to answer correctly for at least half of the total questions. At the end of the session, I discussed each question with the students, explaining the reasoning behind the correct answers. From today's activity, I observed that when students were given adequate practice, and the material was presented in the form of quizzes or games, they were able to understand the content well. It leads them to become more actively engaged in the learning process." (T#4_RJ-IST4_Entry#4).

The data analysis revealed that the testing phase of reflective practice often serves as a deliberate mechanism for validating pedagogical hypotheses and reinforcing student learning. In the participants' journals, testing frequently appeared after a targeted

instructional intervention, functioning both as a diagnostic tool and a strategy for sustaining engagement. For example, IST 4 identified students' persistent difficulty with tense changes in reported speech and hypothesized that repeated practice through varied examples could strengthen their mastery. To operationalize this hypothesis, she incorporated a game-based activity (UNO Block) to create an interactive, low-stakes environment for practice, an approach supported by research emphasizing the value of playful, collaborative tasks in enhancing grammatical awareness and learner motivation (Lukas et al., 2020; Zhang, 2023). In the subsequent lesson, this hypothesis evolved into overt testing through a structured quiz, which enabled IST 4 to measure comprehension, provide immediate corrective feedback, and consolidate learning. Across the dataset, such cycles were common, with testing and reasoning frequently co-occurring, indicating a shift toward higher-order reflection that underpins professional autonomy (Chan & Lee, 2020; Cornish & Jenkins, 2012; Asaoka, 2021). Moreover, the observed variability in the sequence of reflective elements aligns with contemporary perspectives that view reflection as a flexible, context-responsive process rather than a strictly linear progression (Salih & Omar, 2022; Mermelstein, 2018).

Exploration in Teacher Autonomy

This study examined teacher autonomy by focusing on the degree of freedom teachers exercised in lesson planning. Interview data revealed that participants demonstrated problem-solving skills by considering multiple solutions to address students' needs in their teaching practice. While some adaptations were made in response to situational challenges, these adjustments reflected the teachers' autonomy in classroom practice, as they implemented self-initiated pedagogical decisions. The findings showed that participants employed varied approaches to lesson planning. For example, IST 4 adapted the sequence of topics in the syllabus, exercising autonomy by reorganizing her classroom instruction to strengthen students' weaknesses before progressing to more advanced material:

"... there was a case in grade 12, we had material about discussion text, and the learning objectives had been determined together through a discussion forum. It turned out that in class, it was found that students were still lacking in the pronoun section, so I chose to teach pronouns first before entering new material."
(IST4_INT)

IST 5 demonstrated autonomy by preparing material not included in the prescribed textbook. His decision to prioritize learners' needs over the set material was based on diagnostic assessments:

"When developing the CP, teachers must adapt to the students' conditions at this school. There was a case where the textbook began with descriptive text, but based on diagnostic tests and other assessments, we noticed that students still struggled with daily expressions, such as greetings and partings. Since this material was not included in the book, we sourced it ourselves. As a result, we use the textbook only when its content aligns with students' needs." (IST5_INT)

Similarly, IST 1 deviated from the textbook's original content, replacing it with topics that were more relevant and suited to the students' current learning priorities:

“Usually, in books from school, there is a material that is no longer eligible and should not be given any more, so we replace it with material that they must get at this time. There are many books like that, and the school library takes a while to replace them, so I prefer to look for material from other books or other sources.” (IST1_INT)

The accounts from IST 4, IST 5, and IST 1 collectively illustrate how teacher autonomy is enacted by intentionally adapting lesson content to address emergent learner needs. Rather than adhering rigidly to the prescribed syllabus or textbook sequence, these teachers exercised professional judgment to reorganize, supplement, or replace materials in ways that better aligned with their students’ proficiency levels and immediate learning priorities. IST 4’s decision to postpone teaching a discussion text until reinforcing students’ mastery of pronouns demonstrates a diagnostic, needs-driven approach to sequencing content—an example of what [Han \(2020\)](#) describes as the interplay between pedagogical autonomy and learner-centered decision-making. Similarly, IST 5’s integration of foundational daily expressions, despite their absence from the textbook, reflects an assessment-informed responsiveness that prioritizes functional language competence over strict curriculum compliance. IST 1’s proactive sourcing of relevant materials from alternative resources further exemplifies the capacity to navigate systemic constraints, such as outdated or misaligned textbooks, to ensure curricular relevance. These actions align with recent scholarship that frames teacher autonomy as a dynamic process of context-sensitive decision-making, informed by reflective practice and ongoing evaluation of instructional outcomes ([Lefebvre et al., 2023](#); [Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021](#); [Gudeta, 2022](#)). Such adaptive practice enhances the relevance and effectiveness of instruction and reinforces the reciprocal relationship between self-directed teaching and sustained professional growth.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how reflective journal writing can support EFL teachers in making informed instructional decisions and exercising professional autonomy in response to classroom realities. The analysis identified all five elements of reflection, suggestions, problems, hypotheses, reasoning, and testing, with testing and reasoning appearing most often and frequently occurring in combination. These elements did not follow a fixed order but emerged in varied, context-dependent sequences, indicating that reflective thinking is a flexible process shaped by situational demands. The journal entries showed that teachers used reflection to adjust lesson pacing, introduce targeted language support, embed supplementary activities, and address behavioral concerns in ways that responded to learners’ immediate needs. Reflection also informed decisions to adapt or replace prescribed materials, drawing on assessment results and prior teaching experience to maintain relevance to students’ proficiency levels and learning priorities. These findings suggest that reflective journal writing can provide a useful means for linking observation with purposeful instructional adjustment, while also supporting the development of professional judgment. While the study was conducted in a specific context with a limited number of participants, the patterns observed may offer insights for teacher education programs seeking to integrate reflective practice as a tool for fostering adaptive, context-sensitive pedagogy.

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